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AUTHOR	Rowell, James R., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

This report reviews the literature concerning the causes of student attrition for both the community college and the four-year institution. These causes can be grouped as self-related and college-related. Self-related factors involve actual and perceived ability, background and motivation for college, family influences and expectations, and previous school experience. College-related factors are those which bear on the student after he arrives on campus. Being a composite of interaction between self and peer groups, faculty, curricula, and institutional practices and mores, in which expectations are tightly interwoven, these factors are far more difficult to evaluate and change for the better. The persister and the dropout are mainly distinguished by respective success in adapting to a situation, in establishing satisfactory personal relationships, and in adjusting goals in light of realities. Psychological counseling, compensatory education programs, sound financial counseling, and vocational and professional awareness sessions must be seen as integral parts of any college situation. One may only conclude that too many students are being lost from the ranks of today's colleges, and the problem is at least partly solvable. (Author/AH)

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STUDENT ATTRITION

IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A SURVEY OF RECENT LITERATURE

by:

JAMES R. ROWELL, JR.

JC 750 042

CENTER FOR COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

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INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest and most perplexing problems which faces modern day educators is the alarming attrition rate of students in higher education. Better than one-quarter of the freshmen at four-year institutions, and about one-third of the freshmen at community colleges failed to return for the next consecutive year (Astin, 1972).

Though these rates are lower than those of five years ago when almost one-half of the freshmen at both four-year and two-year schools failed to re-enroll in the fall of 1967, the figures still merit concern (AACJC, 1968, 1969).

It is the purpose of this paper to examine a sampling of the most recent research on attrition in higher education. The focus shall be narrowed to the following two areas: (1) the characteristics of the students who drop-out after or during their freshman year and (2) their reasons given for doing so. Looking at these areas, administrators may acquire some of the necessary background information to better understand the most complex nature of a significant part of the college population -- the potential drop-out. Only with a better understanding of this segment of students, may educators continue to reduce the number of drop-outs, and more properly serve a broader segment of the student populace.

THE FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION

The literature shows a great many recent studies of the student drop-out from the four-year institution. At the University of Alberta (Mehra, 1973) the results of an extensive survey indicate that, indeed, the student drop-out is a "complex phenomena", and more in-depth research on the subject is necessary before a profile may be even attempted. Diversity within the drop-out group is very much a reality and it is definitely an oversimplification to combine all drop-outs in one broad category.

At the University of Utah, attrition studies indicate that colleges actually underestimate the persistence of students. Since World War II, though less than 25% of Utah's students graduate on time; re-enrollment figures show that about 60% do eventually receive the bachelor's degree. The implications of these findings should lead the educators in four-year institutions to adjust schedules and curricula and to provide better counseling all to better serve the college "stop-out" (Jex and Merrill, 1967).

An overview of the recent studies indicates that attrition is normally due to a great number of inter-related factors such as student characteristics, conflicts between the student and the institution, and "other family and outside matters" (Knoell, 1964). Although all students admittedly have problems, one single event may sometimes trigger a student's decision to withdraw. Financial problems is one most often mentioned by withdrawers of both sexes (University of Illinois, 1971; Yuker and Lichtenstein, 1972; Cope and Hewitt, 1971); marriage for women (Hill, 1966); and low

academic performance, again for both sexes; though poor grades oftentimes may mirror deeper and more complex problems.

At the University of Massachusetts, a study indicates that successful persisters beyond the freshman year displayed strong interests in social development, vocational goals, and a moderate appreciation for academic and intellectual activities (Savicki, et. al., 1970) A somewhat conflicting study, though, at another school, showed that persisters tended to be undersocialized and slightly uncomfortable in groups (Hanson and Taylor, 1970).

College success and persistence was positively related to faculty attention per demand (though curiously only for male students) (Karmens, 1972) and elaborate personal and academic counseling services. Obviously a personalized approach to education and personal problems helped to make students comfortable and pleased with their surroundings. Interestingly enough, though, the physical size and enrollment figures of the four-year institutions had little effect on whether students continued (Karmens, 1972).

As to student characteristics, creativity, originality, spontaneity and independent achievement were all positively related to persistence and college success (Hill, 1966), though at MIT research found that creative students there were less likely to graduate; in fact 59% of those labeled "creative" withdrew from the Institute after their freshman year (Research Reporter, 1967).

Educational attainment of parents plays a rather decided role, fathers of drop-outs being heavily represented among the lower educational groups,

and the mothers educational level being significantly related to staying in college (Cross, 1968). Persistence is positively associated with family expectations for future success (Trent and Medsker, 1968; Nasson College, 1972; University of Washington, 1971; Hanson and Taylor, 1970). Also, parental aid for college finances was one of the principal factors affecting continuing in college (Panos, 1967; University of Illinois, 1971).

What is the best predictor of a students persistence and success in a four-year college? High School grades and standardized test scores still remain number one (Columbia University, 1973; Gatzella and Bentall, 1967). A significant relationship between lower-than-average math ability on the SAT and dropping out in the freshman year was pointed up at a study at Clemson College. Verbal scores of less-than-average showed little relationship to dropping out at the freshman level, however, a significant number of those students dropping out after two years of schooling had low verbal SAT scores (Hardie and Anderson, 1971).

Once in college, freshman liberal arts majors were more apt to drop out (Reed, 1967) and engineering students were more apt to change majors because of low academic performance combined with a low self-concept (Athanasiou, 1971).

The withdrawer from the four-year institution oftentimes displays a benavior pattern which includes lack of self discipline, impulsivity, high anxiety, less altruistic behavior, identity confusion, and low self-concept (Davis, 1971; Hannah, 1971). Educators, though, must be cautious not to prematurely categorize a student's behavior pattern, for as has been previously stated, drop-outs are a complex "phenomenon". Of the

students dropping out from Southern Illinois University, the most common disturbances of those seeking psychiatric counseling were depression, drug and alcohol abuse problems and inadequate personality (Davis, et. al., 1971). It seems evident that expanded student services in both personal and academic counseling, better orientation to college living responsibilities and work loads, and emergency funds for financial crises might be given a high priority in college planning to effectively lower the present attrition rates.

THE TWO-YEAR SCHOOLS

A sampling of recent literature shows that attrition studies for the two-year college have followed similar channels as those for the four-year schools. Again it must be made clear that students drop-out because of a number of inter-related factors, and there is little evidence to show that the profile of the drop-out is anything but complex. Studies at Vancouver City College show that all types of students, including those with serious intellectual interests and high academic ability withdraw from the community college (Jones, 1972).

Financial reasons have been identified as a major cause for student withdrawal at many institutions and it is entirely understandable that more part-time than full-time students withdraw (Santa Fe, 1973; Alfred, 1972). Of those part-time students who did withdraw, financial and personal reasons were most often cited for their decision (Moraine Valley, 1973; Santa Fe, 1973;)

Personal motivation was listed as an important factor for persisters in two-year colleges in surveys initiated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (October, 1971). In a separate study done by Harcum Junior College (Pennsylvania) the smaller community college with enrollments of 250-750 students had a higher retention rate (Blais, 1972). Along the same lines of students desiring a more personalized community college experience, studies at Miami-Dade show that attrition may be minimized with more student-teacher, student-administrator contact. As the amount of personalized attention grew, the more the students seem to be satisfied with their education, and thus they remained (May, 1973).

Extensive counseling in both the academic and personal areas was proven to lower the attrition rate in the Napa Valley Community College (1971) and was also mentioned in the Vancouver City College study (Jones, 1972). In a study of the New York State two-year college system, it was found that just less than one-half of the freshmen do not enroll the next year. The major reason given by the students was dissatisfaction with their areas of study, and the irrelevancy of their college education. Follow-up studies show that of those who did drop out, some 40% re-enrolled after two semesters, but of those re-enrolling almost 90% did so in new fields of study (Knoell, 1966). Based on the Napa Valley study findings, sound counseling upon entrance to the New York schools could have significantly lessened the attrition figures.

Academic success is also a major influence to the continuing students. At Montgomery Community College freshmen cumulative averages were forgiven to see if "success" would have an effect on returning students for their sophomore year. A large percentage of those with below average grade point records not only returned but finished above the middle of their graduating class (White, 1971). A study of three Florida Community Colleges showed that low academic success was listed as a major reason for discontinuing freshman (Davis, 1970).

Community college persisters were noted in the Brawer study (1972) to have the ability to tolerate ambiguity, delay gratification, relate to themselves, and have a higher personal identity rating on a "functional potential" scale than non-persisters.

Attrition rate and the number of courses dropped prior to leaving was studied in Kansas City, and it is interesting to note that 70% of the females and 59% of the males dropped two courses prior to finally withdrawing (Alfred, 1972). Registrar's offices and counselors working together could make good use of such warning signs as definite outcries from the student for help. Here is an area where intervention by a counselor could indeed prevent a student from becoming part of the statistics on attrition.

In Florida two recent studies at Santa Fe Community College (1973) and one study at Lake City Community College (1973), show many more part-time than full-time students drop out, and that the Florida Twelfth Grade Test serves as a good predictor of potential withdrawers. At Lake City, it was found that 67% of those students withdrawing scored below 200 on the state exam. At Sante Fe, non-graduates averaged below 300, whereas graduates scores were averaged at 315. If the concept of the community college and its open door is to continue, more compensatory education courses seem to be indicated to increase the probability of students' success.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This updated literature search on attrition in higher education continues to maintain Turner's thesis in a Florida IRC paper. Causative agents in drop-out for both the community college and the four-year institution can be grouped as self-related and college-related. This grouping is strictly for convenience and it should not be concluded that Knoell's "outside impinging factors" can be ignored. They are merely set aside as influences over which neither the student nor the institution can exert much control (March, 1970).

Self-related factors involve actual and perceived ability, background and motivation for college as well as family influences and expectations, and previous school experience.

College related factors are those which bear on the student after he arrives on campus. Being a composite of interaction between self and peer groups, faculty, curricula, and institutional practices and mores, in which expectations are tightly interwoven, these factors are far more difficult to evaluate and change for the better. The persister and the non-persister are mainly distinguished by respective success in adapting to a situation, in establishing satisfactory personal relationships, and in adjusting goals in light of realities.

It is up to today's colleges to continue to better understand their students, and in doing so this author concurs with O'Brian's statement that "loud and clear sounds the call for the marked upgrading of the colleges' counseling services, with emphasis on the application -- not just availability of these services immediately upon matriculation" (O'Brian, 1967) and on a continuous basis.

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Psychological counseling, compensatory education programs, sound financial counseling, and vocational and professional awareness sessions must be seen as integral parts of any college situation. Through these programs the potential drop-out may find guidelines and possible answers and methods for handling the causative agents in both the self-related and college-related categories.

To insure that education is instrumental to further achievement, today's colleges must insure that the diverse segments of the populace served be considered in the planning of curriculum and the making of institutional policies. As the complexity of the student drop-out is so evident, most students just cannot make use of regular pre-planned programs. Students are unique individuals and it is up to the colleges to properly assess the status of the populace served. Indeed, it is imperative that research be done on each student's educational and personal needs on a continuous and dynamic basis . . . only then may the institutions properly make decisions and provide better service (Tucker, 1973).

One may only conclude that too many students are being lost from the ranks of today's colleges and the situation is if not fully, at least partly remedial. Student personnel services in most colleges though, are seriously deficient in the needed programs and staffing to properly handle the overwhelming problems of the "total student". Critical influence in such areas as lessening student attrition through proper counseling and educational needs assessments has been evidenced. It is now up to the colleges to take serious note and move forward. Student personnel services must be brought to the forefront for the needed action.

FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION

RANK ORDER OF DROP-OUT PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND REASONS GIVEN FOR LEAVING:

Most Often Cited

Low Self-Attitude

Money Problems

* * *

Lack of personalized education (teacher attention)

Low high school grades and standardized test scores

* * *

Conflict of personal values with institution

Poor Counseling

Part-time vs. Full-time

Lack of commitment of education

Academic problems

Least Often Cited

Too many extra-curricular activities

Lack of creativity, spontaneity, independence

Lack of strong backing from home and family

Drug and alcohol problems

TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

RANK ORDER OF DROP-OUT PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS AND REASONS GIVEN FOR LEAVING:

Most Often Cited

Money Problems

Conflict of personal values with institution

Part-time vs. Full-time

Lower high school grades and standardized test scores

* * *

Lack of personalized education (teacher attention)

Academic Problems

* * *

Lack of backing from Home and family

Poor Counseling

Lack of personal commitment

Least Often Cited

Low self-attitude

Drug and alcohol problems

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

JAMES R. ROWELL, JR. *holds degrees in modern American literature, psychology, and secondary education from Rutgers College and Tufts University. He is currently a research-fellow and doctoral candidate at the Institute of Higher Education - University of Florida where he serves as Associate Director of the CENTER FOR COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT.*

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